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ABSTRACT

To help students strengthen competencies in reading and writing direct instruction is essential. Modeling is a key component in direct instruction. The kind of materials used can help provide more cultural awareness among learners. Written materials of current interest need to be selected. Sources are varied including such periodicals as "Time" and "Newsweek" who offer their magazines at reduced cost through education programs. Many newspapers at local levels and "USA Today" at the national level have low-cost school oriented programs. Students can learn to read more competently while learning about the world. Inviting students to study topics that affect both their own lives and the greater community around them encourages self-interest. It is also important to provide essential background information. After initial discussion, students should be asked to read a selection and then respond in writing to several questions. The following categories can be used to generate a variety of interesting and searching questions: (1) recognition; (2) translation; (3) inference; (4) evaluation; (5) explanation; and (6) use of imagination. Variations are boundless, depending on the interests, capabilities, and needs of students. (Thirteen references are attached. Appendixes include a sample article and sample essay questions and responses.) (MG)

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Promoting Reading/Writing Competencies and Cultural Awareness Using a Weekly News Magazine

An underlying theme of several well-publicized reports concerning achievement levels of secondary students suggest that they have limited knowledge of the world. Further, these same reports suggest that students demonstrate little competence when it comes to writing about either what they do know or what they believe. The purpose of this paper is not to elaborate on deficiencies among secondary students but to present strategies designed to help overcome weaknesses in reading and writing while, at the same time, encouraging cultural awareness. References concerning the need for such strategies are numerous and convincing; among them are Hirsch (1987), Cheney (1987), Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1987), Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) and the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). To help students strengthen competencies in reading and writing direct instruction is essential. Modeling is a key component in direct instruction. Durkin (1989) described modeling as "an attempt to demonstrate, or act out, a particular behavior or thought process" (pg. 61). Further, the kind of materials used can help provide more cultural awareness among learners. A model for approaching both of these ends, improving reading and writing competencies and increasing cultural awareness, is presented below:

Instructional model:

1. Select well written material of current interest. Articles for in-depth study do not necessarily have to reflect present interests of students but should have considerable importance. For example, a recent article concerning the U.S. federal budget deficit was not of great interest at first but further study led to considerably more interest as students related the budget deficit

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to their own ambitions and interests. Students were not interested in the deficit essentially because they had little understanding of what it was and its present and potential effect on them. Students were somewhat surprised to learn that each of them owes approximately $10,000.

Sources are varied including such periodicals as Time (phone 1-800-882-0852) and Newsweek (1-800-526-2595) who offer their magazines at reduced cost through education programs. Many newspapers at local levels and USA Today (1-800-752-7510) at the national level have low-cost school oriented programs. A sample high interest article is presented in Appendix A. This article concerns gun control, a lively topic among any secondary or college reading class. Copies of an article such as this and accompanying activities can be kept on file for future use as exams or for study by subsequent classes in light of newer material. For example, wide ranging discussion of gun control is an integral part of most stories concerning the murder of eight people in Kentucky as the result of an attack by a deranged mental patient weilding an AK47 assault rifle (Baker and Murr, 1989, Time, 1989; Baker, 1989). The earlier article described attempts of some members of Congress to pass legislation designed to prevent mental patients, among others deemed too unreliable, from purchasing guns. The defeat of the measure calling for more gun control and the political dynamics surrounding that defeat can be a source of interesting and provocative discussion in light of the Kentucky massacre.

Ocassionally a particular article is found in a source not used regularly in the classroom. In this instance, an article may be photocopied for spontaneous classroom use under the "fair use" provisions of U.S. Public Law 94-4553, 1978. For example, an article from a news magazine concerning computer viruses was studied. A few days later newspapers reported the arrest of a man charged with programming a virus into the memory system of his former

employer's information bank. The original newspaper account and two copies were made available for students to read and discuss. This helped demonstrate the importance and relevance of the article studied earlier. Another example involves a newspaper account of the resignation of 32 year old Monica de Greiff from her position as Justice Minister of Columbia (Associated Press, 1989). This story came shortly after students intensely studied a comprehensive article about the Medellin drug cartel of Columbia (Serrill, 1989). Serrill's article prominently featured a description of Ms. deGreiff's courageous efforts in fighting the drug lords despite threats against her life and the lives of her family. Analysis of the associated Press account reveals; however, the fact that her resignation resulted from internal pressure rather than threats from drug dealers. Students can compare events reported in both articles and draw their own conclusions. Such exciting reading involves students deeply in powerful events; events such as the drug problem that can, and probably do, either directly or indirectly, effect their lives.

In addition to comprehensive articles, very short but highly interesting news articles appear regularly in news magazines and other sources such as magazines accompanying Sunday newspapers. These are particularly good at the onset of a program involving essay writing since they are considerably easier for students to write about. For example, a 200 word article described how rock singer David Lee Roth participates in rock climbing. Students responded to the following question: Why is David Lee Roth a rock star in more ways than one? The activity proved both interesting and academically profitable.

In selecting material, the main purpose is to find material of interest or at least potential interest and value relative to cultural awareness. Students can learn to read more competently while learning about the world. Students, of course, cannot greatly enhance cultural awareness all at once. However,

inviting them to study topics that effect both their own lives and the greater community around them encourages self-interest, a great initial motivator. An article about depletion of the ozone layer, for example, has more awareness value than an article about migration of caribou. Such articles abound: instructors need only an alert eye to build a valuable collection of them.

2. Provide essential background information. A large wall map is extremely helpful for showing students where various countries are located and how nations are geographically related. For example, stories about unrest in Armenia and Azerbaijan were made more meaningful through the use of a wall map. Essential vocabulary not discernable from context can also be presented along with background information.

3. After initial discussion, ask students to read a selection or several selections and then respond in writing to several questions. The following categories, suggested by Trosky (1972), can be used to generate a variety of interesting and searching questions: 1. recognition questions requiring only ability to locate an answer found directly in the text, 2. translation questions to determine if readers can put ideas into their own words, 3. inference questions demonstrating ability to reason beyond what is directly stated in the text, 4. evaluation questions to provide students with the opportunity to apply their own values in responding, 5. questions that require explanation of why something happened, and 6. questions that require use of imagination based on informed reasoning. Naturally, some stories lend themselves more readily than others to particular types of questions.

Nunnally (1972) suggested using several shorter essay items rather than fewer longer ones. He also admonished question writers to "provide enough detail in the question to accurately aim students toward the correct response" (pg. 182). Nunnally's precise, yet comprehensive, instructions for preparing

and evaluating essays can be extremely helpful.

Student essays can be examined by the instructor and comments prepared for the next class meeting. Sample comments are: 1. write out single digits (ex. "five" and not "5"), 2. watch letter formation, 3. use more paragraphs, and 4. start each response to a question with a sentence that restates the important information asked for in the question, etc. Preparing comments for the entire group and presenting examples on a chalkboard or overhead is more helpful and efficient than dealing primarily with individual students. Students can engage in a great deal of writing. The instructor does not need to write copious comments on each paper. The "general comments" approach works well. Student essays can be kept in file folders, one for each student. In this way, students can evaluate their essays along with the teacher. For example, students can compare essays written early in the semester with essays written as the term progresses. Shaughnessy (1977) determined in her classic study of underprepared college students that the act of writing, in and of itself, promotes competence in writing.

Present model answers to essay questions on an overhead projector or individually reproduced on a sheet for students. Students can compare their responses with the ones presented. The purpose is not to present "the" right answer but to demonstrate how an acceptable response was determined.

Since most essay questions require at least some degree of convergent thinking, a rich variety of responses can be expected in written essays and during discussions. Consequently, the instructor's model response is viewed as a guide more than a benchmark regarding quality. Sample questions and responses are presented in Appendix B.

Conclusions:

Students find themselves involved in study of events that might have an immediate or potential effect on their lives. Thus, greater interest is evident. Competencies developed can transfer to other courses, even where the interest level is not as high. Variations are boundless, depending on interests, capabilities, and needs of students. Materials are easy to prepare and offer the instructor, as well as students, variety and stimulating subject matter. A news magazine is a valuable resource and can be used as the major or even the only text in a college reading class. The user of a news magazine needs not be an authority on national and world events. Far from it, the teacher can learn right along with students and share writing experiences and insights gained. It's exciting to have a new textbook each week!

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APPENDIX A

Sample Article

Why Wait A Week To Kill?

"Guns don't kill; people do." The simple logic of that refrain from the National Rifle Association would suggest that the nation's 2.8 million-member gun lobby would support any move to keep the wrong people from acquiring deadly weapons. Not so. The N.R.A. invariably goes to war against any attempt to limit the avalanche of handguns that are used to kill 21,000 Americans annually. Last week the gun lobby triumphed in its latest campaign, a $4 million effort against a sensible congressional proposal to strengthen existing federal restrictions on the sale of handguns. The legislation would have required gun dealers to wait seven days before completing a sale, giving police time to determine whether a buyer is a convicted felon, an illegal alien, a drug abuser or a mental patient. Last week the House meekly bowed to N.R.A. pressure and killed the proposed waiting period by a vote of 228 to 182.

The legislation was inspired in part by Sarah Brady, wife of White House Press Secretary James Brady, who remains an invalid seven years after being hit by one of John Hinckley's bullets during the attempt to assassinate President Reagan. She has led a series of fights for tighter gun laws. The Brady amendment enjoyed broad support from gun-control opponents, including an unusual coalition of eleven national police organizations. Even the President praised the idea of a waiting period, citing how well it has worked in California. But with elections only six weeks away, many Congressmen who favored the proposal could not ignore the powerful N.R.A.

Florida Republican Congressman Bill McCollumn Jr. offered a way out of the quandary. He proposed replacing the waiting-period requirement with a provision to give all 275,000 federally licensed gun dealers in the U.S.

instant access to a nationwide list of convicted felons. Prospective gun buyers could be fingerprinted and the samples sent electronically to Washington for an instantaneous check against the FBI's millions of prints.

But there is no master list of convicted felons, no way to make such data quickly and widely available, and no speedy means of sending and matching fingerprints. A network to provide such information could take years to create and cost up to $500 million: making it available to gun dealers could violate civil liberties. Beyond that, McCollum's system would not prevent gun sales to illegal aliens and the mentally ill.

Still, a majority of House members reached for this fig leaf. They voted to kill the Brady amendment and replace it with McCollum's phantom plan. Even leading Democrats from states where the N.R.A. is strong, like House Majority Leader Tom Foley of Washington and House Whip Tony Coelho of California, supported the gun lobby. They contended, as has George Bush, who boasts that he is a life member of the N.R.A., that such restrictive legislation should be left to the states. But only 22 states require waiting periods. A gun buyer in a hurry need only cross a state line to speed his purchase.

That disparity caused Illinois Republican Henry Hyde, one of the House's most conservative legislators, to abandon his normal states' rights stance. "These guns are ambulatory," Hyde argued. "This is a national problem. If we made it a little more difficult for someone who is angry and wants to kill, maybe we would save some lives." Demonstrating how the issue cuts across both ideology and geography, Speaker Jim Wright of Texas joined Hyde in opposing the McCollum proposal, despite his home state's animus to gun control.

Their logic did not prevail against the N.R.A.'s cold cash. Collectively, the Congressmen who voted to doom the waiting period have received $1,167,908 from the gun lobby in the past five years. The 70% of Americans who support tighter gun controls are rarely as passionate, vocal or generous.

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APPENDIX B

Sample Essay Questions and Responses

1. Approximately how many Americans each year are killed by people using handguns?

   Approximately 21,000 Americans are killed each year by people using handguns.

2. What proposal concerning limiting the sale of handguns was recently defeated in Congress?

   Congress defeated a bill to require gun dealers to wait seven days before completing the sale of a handgun. Proponents of the bill argued that the delay is necessary so that police would have time to determine if the prospective buyer is eligible to buy a gun legally. Mental patients, convicted felons, illegal aliens, and drug abusers are not permitted to buy handguns legally.

3. What did Congressman Bill McCollum propose as an alternate to the waiting period? What weaknesses are there in Congressman McCollum's proposal?

   Congressman Bill McCollum proposed that gun dealers have access to an FBI data bank that would identify convicted felons through checking electronically transmitted fingerprints. This approach is flawed for several reasons: (a) there is no master list of convicted felons, drug abusers, or potentially dangerous mental patients, (b) there are no provisions for detecting illegal aliens, (c) there are Constitutional questions concerning civil liberties, and (d) the cost of setting up and monitoring such a system is likely to be very high.

4. How do you feel about the proposed waiting period?

The proposal requiring gun dealers to wait seven days before completing the sale of a handgun is a very sound idea. The waiting period would do much to prevent the sale of handguns to those not legally qualified to purchase them: drug abusers, convicted felons, and illegal aliens. Further, the waiting period can prevent persons from buying handguns in the heat of anger or depths of depression. The delay is sensible, especially for those who fear becoming victims of a crime involving a handgun.